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ABSTRACT

Most journalism textbooks begin with lists of what have been called "news values." These are criteria to be used to judge the newsworthiness of issues, events, and persons. The list of news values that most journalists have memorized can be replaced with a single concept--vividness. Vividness is a characteristic of the information produced by events, issues, and people. It is not spread equally among all of them, however, an inexact measure of the degree to which information actually explains the nature of events, issues, and persons. That which is vivid is not necessarily particularly accurate or descriptive. Charges of sensationalism, shallowness, and preoccupation with conflict all seem to be aimed at reporters' strict adherence to the law of vividness. If the cognitive psychologists are correct, vivid information is the type of information that people pay attention to and remember. Journalists have the difficult task of making pallid information seem vivid without distorting it. This goal might be more attainable if journalists understood the complexity of the issues involved. (HOD)

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News Values and the Vividness of Information

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News Values and the Vividness of Information

In recent years, efforts at defining news have moved away from news as an "object" with its own inherent qualities and toward a definition of news as the outcome of a process. This process has been shown to incorporate considerations of time and space, by learned traditions, by bureaucratic structures and by what best seems to meet the needs of news organizations (Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978, Altheide, 1976; Roshco, 1975).

The critical fact here is that the commodity being processed is information. The news process is one of selecting, shaping and presenting information. In fact, the "news-as-process" approach assumes that "news" does not exist until information has been selected, shaped and presented. If this is the case, then we should not be so concerned with the nature of news, but with the nature of the information that is processed into news. What are the qualities of information produced by events, issues and individuals that make its selection more or less likely, that make it more or less "newsworthy"?

Most journalism textbooks begin with lists of what have been called "news values". These are criteria to be used to judge the "newsworthiness" of issues, events and persons. One popular reporting text lists them as conflict progress, disaster, consequence, eminence, prominence, timeliness, proximity, novelty and human interest (Harriss, Leiter and Johnson, 1981). Rather than thinking of these news values as criteria for judging newsworthiness, it might be more useful to treat them as ways of judging the qualities of information that make it attract or even demand attention.

Researchers in the relatively new field of cognitive social psychology have been concerned with the qualities of information that make it likely to be noticed, remembered and by extension, incorporated into the processes of social judgment and inference. Nisbett and Ross (1980) have developed the principle that some information is by nature more "vivid" than other information, in other words, has certain perceptual qualities that give it a greater role in cognitive processing than other information. They describe "vivid" information as

> likely to attract and hold our attention and to excite the imagination to the extent it is (a) emotionally interesting, (b) concrete and imagery-producing, and (c) proximate in a sensory, temporal, or spatial way (p. 45).

Although a reporter would not phrase it this way, this seems to be a very traditional definition of what he or she would look for in a news story -- vividness. It could also serve as a good listing of news values.

Vividness as a Standard for Evaluating Information

All information is not created equal. Some information is easier to perceive, easier to understand and easier to remember. It is "vivid" and therefore more likely to be incorporated in judgment and decision making. Nisbett and Ross have said such information is characterized by its emotional interest, its concreteness and by its temporal, spatial and sensory proximity to the perceiver. Emotional interest has to do with the amount of personal relevance the perceiver can find in the information. Nisbett and Ross note that events are more interesting "when they happen to people we know than when they happen to people we do not know, and they are more interesting when they happen to people about whom we have strong feelings than when they happen to people about whom we have neutral feelings" (p. 46). In addition, emotional interest increases to the extent that events involve participants' "needs, desires, motives and values" (p. 46). In other words, we can empathize and sympathize with other people if we have the correct information about them. We can do this because we probably have many of the same "needs, desires, motives and values." Vivid information allows the perceiver to put himself or herself in the place of the participants in events. It allows for a surrogate experience.

Adding to the emotional impact of information is its concreteness, which, according to Nisbett and Ross, includes the "degree of detail and specificity about actors, actions and situational context. These factors contribute to the 'imaginability' of information, that is, its tendency

to prompt sensory imagery" (p. 47). In other words, the more we know about the details of situations, people and outcomes, the more empathic and sympathetic we are able to be -- the more we are able to picture ourselves in the same circumstances.

Temporal, spatial or sensory proximity are important because they create more of a sense of individual involvement in events. Nisbett and Ross write, "The news that a bank in one's neighborhood has been robbed just an hour ago is more vivid than the news that a bank on the other side of town was robbed last week. The former bank robbery, accordingly, is likely to have a greater impact on one's views of the seriousness of the crime problem in one's city or the need for stiffer prison sentences for bank robbers" (p. 50).

The opposite of vivid information is "pallid" information. This information is likely to be abstract or general, concern distant events, issues or people whose relevance is undemonstrated, and may exist in the form of data summaries or aggregates, rather than in individual cases or anecdotes.

A major reason vividness is so important is its role in memory. Nisbett and Ross write, "Vivid information is more liekly to be stored and remembered than pallid information is. Information that is easily remembered is by definition more likely to be retrieved at some later date and therefore to affect later inferences" (p. 45). This relates to the Taylor and Fiske (1977) discussion of the short cuts people apparently use in searching for explanations of events. They write,

"Many perceivers seek a single, sufficient, and salient explanation for behavior, often the first one that comes along" (p. 251). An explanation is accepted because of its salience, as Taylor and Fiske propose, or because of its "availability," according to Tversky and Kahneman (1974). In other words, people choose from among what has been made cognitively available, rather than compare all possible alternatives. Taylor and Fiske have called this the "top-of-the-head phenomenon." Obviously, vividness contributes significantly to availability and salience of information.

The "Informativeness" of Vivid Information

While vivid information may be easy to perceive, understand and remember, it is not necessarily the best information in terms of its relevance to reaching inferences, drawing conclusions and making decisions. As Nisbett and Ross point out, "By default, more vivid information is more likely to enter inferential processes than is less vivid information. This strategy of evidential weighting is dangerous because the vividness of information is normally related only obliquely at best to its true value as evidence" (p. 8).

This over-reliance on vivid information is one of the cognitive errors in information processing that researchers in cognitive psychology have been uncovering in recent years. The point of view of much of this research is that the individual is faced everyday with the need to attribute dispositions to individuals, of effects to causes and outcomes to particular action sequences. These are the major assumptions of attribution theory (Kelley, 1967; Kelley, 1971). Because of the similarity of these tasks to those of the scientist, Ross (1977) refers to the average individual as "an intuitive psychologist who seeks to explain behavior and draw inferences about actors and their environments" (p. 175). In doing this, however, most of us are likely to make a number of specific and systematic errors. According to Ross, these errors can "lead the intuitive psychologist to misinterpret events and hence to behave in ways that are personally maladaptive, socially pernicious, and often puzzling to the social scientist who seeks to understand such behavior" (p. 181).

As an explanation for these errors, Taylor (1981) has suggested that individuals are "cognitive misers" because of their apparent willingness to "satisfice." By this Taylor means that people engage in a search for an explanation of an event, not until all possible explanations are examined, but only until an apparently satisfactory one has been found. This cognitive laziness can be the source of many errors since, as Taylor notes, "Individuals seem to make judgments much more quickly using much less information and showing much clearer biases than had been thought (p. 194).

The over-reliance on vivid information seems to be the source of much of this trouble, since it seems so often to push what Nisbett and Ross call "highly probative" but "pallid" information out of mind.

Some of this pallid but highly probative information is included in social indicators, data summaries and aggregate statistics. While this may be some of the most reliable and valid information, it is not as likely to be incorporated into cognitive processes. Such information is often ignored in the first place because its perceptual qualities do not encourage attention. But even when it is attended to, it is not often used to evaluate situations and to make judgments. Nisbett, Borgida, Crandall and Reed (1976) provide their readers with what they call a "thought experiment" to illustrate the point. The reader is asked to imagine that, after consulting "Consumer Reports" repair records and the evaluations of automotive experts, he or she decides to buy a Volvo. The reader announces this choice to an acquaintance who says, in effect,

"My cousin had a Volvo. It was a complete disaster. He sold it for junk in three years." The writers ask which of these pieces of information -- the statistical summaries and expert opinions, or the anecdote -- will have more influence on the decision.

An example from journalism will also illustrate the point. Crouse (1974) reports that journalists covering the 1972 presidential campaign of George McGovern were convinced that he could not lose by more than 10 points, when polls were consistently showing him 20 points behind Richard Nixon. These reporters were basing their conclusions on the large and enthusiastic crowds McGovern was drawing -- vivid, concrete and personal experience -- while ignoring the dull, pallid evidence provided by the polls. A similar analysis could probably be made of the final weeks of the 1984 Mondale presidential campaign.

If attributions, inferences, judgments and decisions are indeed made on the information that has been made most vivid, then the least vivid information is contained in what did not happen. Nonoccurrences -- things that might have happened, but did not -- may often be extraordinarily important, but they are simply not "there" for perception in the same sense as those things that do happen. Ross writes, "Nonoccurrences are rarely as salient or cognitively 'available' to the potential attributor as are occurrences. As a consequence, recognition, storage, retreival, and interpretation all become less likely" (1977, p. 197). Nonoccurrences, therefore, are the least salient, least available, or least vivid of all kinds of information. This bias in information processing is more apparent, perhaps, in its opposite, the reliance on and creation of illusory correlations. The occasional juxtaposition of two factors in space or time, however, rare, is much more "available" for perception

and memory than the infinite number of instances in which one factor occurred but the other of the pair did not.

The vividness component is probably also behind perhaps the most common of the cognitive biases, the fundamental attribution error. According to Ross, this is "the tendency for attributors to underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors in controlling behavior" (1977, p. 183). A specific instance of this error is found in the tendency to forget that social interaction is constrained by the roles that are required by situations. People often ignore this fact of life and attribute behavior to internal dispositions. West, Gunn and Chernicky (1975) describe this tendency among the actors and observors of the Watergate scandals.

> The press has proposed such explanations as the paranoid style of the Nixon administration, the recruitment of an amoral staff of non-political administrators, and even such fanciful explanations as that members of the Nixon administration had been injected with "moral penicillin." On the other hand, several members of the Nixon administration have proposed a very different set of explanations of the Watergate burglary and coverup. They have suggested that these activities were a natural result of the potentially violent plans of the radical left and that given the available alternative courses of action, such activities were demanded by circumstances (p. 55).

An explanation of the fundamental attribution error is a simple fact of perception. The actor in any situation is the "figure" and the context or situation is the "ground" within which or against which he or she acts. The actor is easier to perceive, but also the actions of an individual are concrete, they are likely to be proximate, and they are likely to be emotionally involving. Taylor and Crocker (1981) offer the following insight,

> People are good units. They have clear boundaries, unlike events, for example; they intend things, unlike objects or events; they are salient because they move around and make a lot of noise, unlike other features of the environment; and when action occurs, they are frequently responsible for it. Thus, the social perceiver seems to define his or her chief task as finding out what kind of people inhabit the social world (p. 120).

The actions of individuals are simply more salient, more available for perception and memory and more vivid than the context, situation, or role constraints that might actually be operating.

Vividness and Newsworthiness

It is instructive that Nisbett and Ross begin their chapter on vivid information with examples of vivid writing from literature. Citing Sinclair Lewis' The Jungle, Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front, and Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago, they note, "the facts and arguments presented in these works were not completely original. There are more authoritative, better reasoned, and more factual writings on each of the topics of these books, but their reader's beliefs and actions were influenced greatly by these books' vivid, concrete, and absorbing writing..." (p. 44).

Journalists are in the business of reporting that which is vivid, and the style of writing and presentation is designed to enhance the vividness of the information being processed. The use of the active voice, short sentences with simple structures, active, "punchy" verbs, the use of detail, and efforts to localize and personalize stories all demonstrate this tendency. In addition, news values have the effect of sifting out the vivid from the pallid. The vivid is reported, the pallid is either not reported, or reported in a way that makes it vivid.

Nisbett and Ross point out the importance of this issue and how it relates to the media in the following passage:

> As human existence has come to rely more and more on the social transmission of information, the likelihood of being deliberately misled by concrete, vivid accounts also has increased dramatically. Social communicators bombard us with concrete instances and vivid incidents carefully selected (or constructed) to influence our inferences and behavior. In some specific domains -- in our response to advertisements, for example -- we have managed to become wary of the concrete illustration or "testimonial." But these specific skepticisms probably produce little generalized protection. Polls show repeatedly that the

> U.S. public trusts the evening TV news over all other information sources. This medium comes closest to direct sensory contact with information. Only a sophisticated few understand that it is almost as easy to convey misinformation through sight and sound media as through any other medium (p. 60-61).

Journalists are social communicators and the messages they send are carefully selected and constructed. The information from which they select varies in vividness, but that which is selected is mainly the most vivid. The criteria by which they choose information, the news values, virtually ensure this. The effect may be that they miss the real importance of events and issues, or do not cover them at all. The ultimate result, perhaps, is to leave people unprepared for both dangers and opportunities. Nisbett and Ross note that "our world has come to have pressing dangers which are complex and abstract matters such as the destruction of the distant ozone layer or exposure to invisible carcinogenic dangers best described by abstract and often statistical information. Opportunities often are similarly abstract -- stock investment options and home mortgage plans are best understood by data that are pallid..." (p. 60).

The implication, of course, is that if the ordinary perceiver is often led astray by the vivid qualities of the information with which he or she is confronted, so is the journalist. And for the journalist, such perceptions and choices are dictated by news values and traditions. It is clear that these news values and traditions are not merely arbitrary. They exist because they reflect what are apparently natural preferences. So journalists give readers, perhaps not what they want, but at least what they are most likely to perceive and remember.

The Vividness Criterion and Journalistic Shortcomings

Criticism of journalism has come from all quarters in recent years, from government, from the universities, from the public and from the press itself. Despite variations, these criticisms all seem to relate to the basic fact that journalists report what is vivid about events, issues and persons. No matter what definition of news is arrived at, this fact seems inescapable. As has been pointed out, that which is vivid is not necessarily that which is important. In other words, by paying attention to only vivid information contained in concrete events and by seeking out "colorful" quotes rather than the perhaps "pallid" evidence found in documents, reports, studies and surveys, reporters may write a "good" story but miss the "real" story.

This issue can be illustrated by the common observation that news overwhelmingly consists of events, when many important aspects of life are not "packaged" in this manner. Cohen and Young (1981) make this point very clearly and Stephen Hess (1981) relates the point to his study of Washington, D.C. reporters.

> News, for most reporters, is (a) a tangible activity -- a Congressional vote, a Supreme Court decision, a presidential speech -- that (b) occurs in the current 24-hour period. Thus, three-quarters of Washington newspaper stories are about an event that happened yesterday, today, or is expected to happen tomorrow; the figure for network television is 10 percent higher (p. 15).

An event, of course, is more vivid than an issue, trend, problem or condition. Events are concrete; they are "proximate in a sensory, temporal or spatial way." The result may be that the press misses many of the

most momentous stories until they boil up to the surface as disturbing and disruptive events. They are not particularly vivid in their formative, incipient or emergent stages. McCombs (1976a) writes,

> The press is quite adept at handling major misfortunes such as assassinations of political leaders, outbreaks of war, and economic catastrophes. The press can respond rapidly to such events, more rapidly than most public or quasi-public institutions...But when it comes to reporting the broad secular sweep of history, the major trends and thrusts of the times, then the press often lags significantly behind other public institutions. It is not in the press that one often enough learns of deeply embedded social problems, significant social realignments, and proposed solutions to the problems of the day (p. 5).

The information provided by "deeply embedded social problems, significant social realignments and proposed solutions to the problems of the day" may not be vivid, may not be tied to events and may not exhibit perceptual qualities that impose it upon our senses and sensibilities.

The vividness criterion can also explain why so much news seems to be "bad news." After an exhaustive literature review, Bohle (1984) concludes that "approximately one-third of editorial content in the American mass media is negative news and it gets preferential display treatment. This display preference underlines a judgment of significance or importance for negative news. Most evidence points toward a general belief among journalists that negative news is more significant or important than positive news" (pp. 34-35). There are no doubt several reasons for this, but among them is the fact that good news does not express itself very "vividly" in the form of dramatic events, as does bad news. A forest takes 100 years to grow and a day to burn. It is easier to perceive destruction as a concrete event with a cause, a beginning,

an ending and specific, perhaps personal, consequences. Slow development or growth is much harder to perceive in these terms, precisely because it is gradual and is not normally punctuated by dramatic, vivid episodes. Good news is a category of "nonoccurrences." In the social, political, economic and physical worlds, nonoccurrences would seem to be "evidence" that things are proceeding according to plan, custom, expectation or norm. That there were no murders, plane crashes, earthquakes or government corruption is not often noted. Such information can be extraordinarily important, however, even though it is not vivid.

Highly related to this events obsession is the observation that the news tends to be overwhelmingly people-oriented. This might lead one to suspect that the fundamental attribution error is inherent in the journalistic approach. To repeat, the fundamental attribution error predicts that we too often see individuals -- their dispositions, personalities, intentions and efforts -- to be the major causal agents, rather than the pressures of context, situation or role.

The fact is that most journalism is about people and what they do, don't do, should do, should not do, as well as in who is in charge, who is to blame or who should receive credit. Gans (1981) writes, "Journalists often say that the news ought to be about individuals rather than groups or social processes; and by and large, they achieve their aim. Most news is about individuals, although they may be in conflict with groups or impersonal forces such as 'inflation' and 'communism'." Galtung and Ruge (1981) refer to this emphasis on people

as "the personification of news," and note, "The alternative would be to present events as the outcome of 'social forces', as the structuraal more than idiosyncratic outcomes of the society that produced them" (p. 57).

Earlier analysts have come to much the same conclusion. Warren Breed wrote in 1955 that "newsmen tend to analyze their society in terms of personalities, rather than institutions comprising a social and cultural system" (p. 187). And in 1937, Leo Rosten noted that

> most Washington correspondents have a strong faith in individualism and individualistic effort. Their work entails a maximum of competition between persons and it confuses them to attempt a reconciliation of individualism with the contemporary forces of monopoly and neomercantilism that delimit and constrain individual success (p. 239).

The result, he writes, is that the newsmen he observed interpreted events entirely "according to the stylized patterns of persons and fights" rather than clashes of "purpose and ends" (p. 267).

The focus on events, personalities and vivid information seems also to point to the often-observed journalistic preference for conflict. Conflict is often listed as a news value in textbooks (Harriss, Leiter and Johnson, 1981; Mencher, 1977). But as Rosten implies, the fact that there is a conflict may become the point of the story, with little reference to what the conflict might be about. Conflict, especially when it is cast as a clash of wills or personalities, is very vivid. Clashes over complex and abstract policy differences are much less vivid. Obviously, the "personification" of conflict provides readers or viewers

with little enlightenment, but perhaps with a sense that the actors in the situation are involved mainly in ego-enhancement or bureaucratic turf building rather than in serious decision making. Press treatment of the on-going debate between Secretary of State George Schultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger over arms control talks with the Soviets seems to be a case in point.

Coverage of issues and policies is more difficult than conducting interviews and observing events. Hess (1981) points out that the overwhelming amount of "research" reporters conduct is in the form of personal interviews; they rarely go to original documentary sources. They ask people about the content of such sources, rather than study them. As Hess explains, "Poring over documents may be too time-consuming to be a useful tool in covering breaking news. Yet when newspaper and television reporters are given more time to do stories, they simply do more interviews" (p. 19).

Conclusions

The apparent fixation by the press on conflict seems to demonstrate many of the issues raised in this paper -- the focus on events and people, the fundamental attribution error, the predilection for bad news, the noncoverage of nonoccurrences. All of these points relate to a fundamental preference for vivid information. Critics of the press have charged that this can lead to serious misunderstandings of major issues. Cohen (1963) quotes a State Department official, who said, in effect, that in searching for conflict, reporters can easily create it.

> The requirements of news writing are essentially opposed to the objectives of foreign policy. The major criterion of news is conflict; news concerns all the bad things in our international relationships. Our basic objective in foreign policy, on the other hand, is to find accommodations between countries...We minimize our differences with countries outside the Communist circle...but the press wants to maximize conflict. So they make legitimate differences much larger, to the point where they often become "conflict" (p. 164).

"The requirements of news writing" include finding what is vivid in the information created by an event, issue or person. "Sensationalizing" often seems to mean searching for the conflict, the personal aspect, or some other key to vividness to somehow make a story more "newsworthy." Rosten (1937) writes, "The necessity of extracting startling 'angles' from events, for the sake of either creating or enhancing news values, leads newspapermen to take liberties with the material and often do injustice to the facts" (p. 259). Mirroring the Nisbett and Ross conclusion that vivid information is not always the best information, a recent study of press coverage of women's issues concluded the following.

> The current emphasis on controversy, confrontation and sensation does not serve a reader attempting to understand the forces at work in the changing world.
>
> Reporting only the confrontations -- and a number of papers in this study did no more than that -- often obscured the deeper thrust of social change. And when there was no controversy involved, the story was often neglected completely (Women's Studies Program Center of the George Washington University, 1983).

Some of the worst of journalism's problems can be attributed to this over-selectivity of vivid information. For example, it is very predictable that television will cover a colorful and visual "event" but will ignore anything that smacks of "talking heads." This has led those who want to obtain press coverage to stage what Boorstin (1961) has called "psuedo-events." These are "happenings" staged for the sole purpose of gaining media attention. Journalists are quick to call these "non-news" events, the purpose of which is to manipulate the press. Reporters cover many of them anyway because of their vividness. Psuedo-events may indeed victimize and manipulate the press, but they are a direct and logical result of journalists' own addiction to vividness.

The vividness of reporting can backfire in another way too. The overall esteem in which the press is held seems to be declining (Sanoff, 1982; Henry, 1983). One could blame at least some of this on an excess of vividness in reporting. Stakeouts of the homes of prominent people embroiled in controversy and interviews with the parents of children who have just been killed are two examples of reporting practices that might strike some people as gross, even ghoulish, invasions of privacy. These presentations are so vivid that audiences may

empathize with the individuals, not because of their involvement in the news event, but because they seem to be the victims of the press. The implication is that what reporters assume interest audiences may actually repel them, partly because the methods used to obtain or create vivid information seem to violate accepted standards of courtesy and good taste.

These and other issues have led to discussions of the need for "new definitions of news." McCombs (1976b), for example, has suggested that reporters make greater use of social indicators, aggregate statistics contained in government records, to report on the quality of life in their communities. He writes, "Such news sources yield not only the abnormal and the aberrant. From social indicators a total picture can be obtained, including both the normal and the abnormal, the bad news and the good news" (p. 14). Stamm (1976) criticizes the press for too often using a few anecdotes to demonstrate the importance or frequency of some condition or problem. Anecdotal writing is of course vivid writing, although it gives no insights into the general prevalence of an occurrence or condition.

A common suggestion through much of this criticism is that journalists should develop new methods of reporting, and invariably, these methods require that reporters deal with "pallid" information. Community records, scientific surveys and other sources of systematically gathered information provide the very sort of information that Nisbett and Ross say is not likely to be incorporated into cognitive processing.

The journalistic use of political polls may illustrate some of the problems here. While polls are certainly a source of systematically gathered data, journalistic use of such information must give one pause. Reporters often treat polls, not as illuminators of the meaning and importance of issues, but as campaign events which merely contribute to the "horse-race" nature of election coverage. Atkin and Guadino (1984) write, "Instead of covering the candidates' qualifications, philosophies, or issue positions, polls have encouraged journalists to treat campaigns as horse races, with a focus on the candidates' popularity, momentum, and size of lead" (p. 124). In addition, reporters usually neglect the ambiguities of survey design which can radically affect the validity and reliability of poll results. In other words, to reporters, all numbers are created equal (Schneiders, 1984; Ismach, 1984). Finally, the pressure to write unambiguous summary leads may cause reporters to simplify and clarify where the poll results are anything but simple and clear (Wheeler, 1976). The conclusion is that the meaning of the inherently pallid information contained in polls may be distorted in the service of vividness.

Summary

The major point of this paper has been to show that the long list of news values that most journalists have memorized can be replaced with a single concept: vividness. Vividness is a characteristic of the information produced by events, issues and people. It is not spread equally among all of them however. And vividness is also a very inexact measure of the degree to which information is actually very useful in explaining the nature of events, issues and persons. That which is vivid is not necessarily particularly accurate or descriptive. And while vividness can explain much about journalism practice, it also seems to be at the heart of many of journalism's deficiencies. Charges of sensationalism, shallowness and preoccupation with conflict all seem to be aimed at reporters' strict adherence to the law of vividness. If the cognitive psychologists are correct, vivid information is the type of information that people pay attention to and remember. Journalists have the difficult task of making pallid information seem vivid without distorting it. This goal might be somewhat more attainable if journalists at least understand the complexity of the issues involved.

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